



EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

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'Returnable' software has dubious value

A large advertisement in a computer trade magazine reads, "RETURNABLE SOFTWARE — Eliminate the risk of buying software that doesn't meet your needs." The ad goes on to explain that dozens of popular business programs are available from this mail order company at 25 percent to 50 percent off the regular list price, and that the software is returnable within 15 days for a 20% restocking charge.

Now that's an interesting way to buy software, I thought. Buy it through the mail at a discount, try it out on my personal computer, and then return it for a small penalty if it does not fit my needs. On the face of it, it sounds attractive.

But then a more sinister question occurred to me. Is this advertisement really an open invitation for unscrupulous users to borrow the software, make a copy for their own use, and then return the original while continuing to use the copy? Since copying a program is a very easy task, is this just a scheme to rip off the software publishers and make copying and avoidance of purchase easier to accomplish?

Well, as I discovered, not exactly. It turns out that there are a couple of ways to consider this company's offer — one legitimate (which turns out to be based on some faulty reasoning about selecting software), and one devious (which is probably unappealing to most business users).

The legitimate approach

To start out, let's assume that the purchaser is honest and simply wants to find the best software for his or her needs at the lowest possible price. Why not try out a program in the comfort of your office instead of in a dealer showroom? I suspect that most people who order return-

able software fall into this category. Here are three good reasons, however, why this approach is ill-advised:

✓ You need advice. If you're not sure which software is right for your business, the *last place* you should consider buying from is a mail order company. Instead, it's best to visit several local retail computer stores for hands-on demonstrations and product comparisons. Seek advice from as many people as you can find who have similar needs. The more important the purchase is to your business, the more important it is to speak with other users or consultants for solid advice.

✓ You won't know in 15 days (the allowable return period). It's impossible to determine in such a short period of time if a complicated program will be adequate for your business needs. Without receiving the benefit of good advice ahead of time, it typically takes weeks or months for this to become apparent. You'll just be setting yourself up for failure if you attempt to judge a program so quickly.

✓ You'll pay too much. As it turns out, if you decide to return the program, the mail order company will refund the difference between the actual amount you paid and 20 percent of the *list price*. For example, the list price of Word Perfect (the popular word processing program) is \$495, but the mail order company's discount price is \$229. If you return the program, the restocking charge would be 20 percent of \$495, or \$99 — which is actually 43 percent of the price you paid. That's outrageous!

The devious approach

On the other hand, if an individual is really looking to "borrow" a copy of a program in order to make a copy, paying just the \$99 restocking charge might seem attractive. But it's not. It's actually more trouble than it's worth.

✓ Documentation needed. Virtually all worthwhile business programs have extensive manuals, learning booklets or other printed reference materials. If the programs are returned, these must go back too. Trying to make photocopies is simply not worth the effort.

✓ Often not feasible. In many cases, the individual is disappointed to discover that "copy protection" techniques have been used by the programmers of the software that make it difficult or impossible to make a copy.

✓ Remorse. Most businesses frown upon copying for moral or ethical reasons. But buyer's remorse is another self-limiting factor. Looking back on the decision later on, the individual will probably regret it. No person wants to be cheated, and I suspect that the knowledge that he or she cheated someone else would inhibit effective use of the program anyway.

A better strategy

From a pragmatic point of view, I think a sensible way to proceed is to seek mail order sources only if you know *exactly* what you want, and you don't need advice or local support in any way. In such cases, research the computer trade journals (such as those available on newsstands) and then do business with the company that offers the very lowest price.

THE BOTTOM LINE: It's best to avoid the companies that use the gimmick of "returnable" software for another reason: You'll avoid the possibility of inadvertently buying software that was returned by someone else.

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